

Notes on the Gullah Aesthetic In Language and Prayer

by Walter Rhett

For example, here is Edward Everett's second second paragraph from his featured address at Gettysburg:



St. Helena's Island Fourth of July Celebration.
Marion Post Wolcott Photograph. 1937. LOC.

The essay opens in a grand, iconic American voice, public oratory. Oratory formed a main part of public life in the 19th century with featured lectures in ornate halls lined with crowds for and against a speaker. With bold assertions and layered detail, the speaker sought to establish moral authority within politics and popular issues, including slavery. The speeches were heavily sprinkled with Latin and Greek words in long, flowery, complex sentences, forcefully emphasizing controversial or exalted main ideas.

It was appointed by law in Athens, that the obsequies of the citizens who fell in battle should be performed at the public expense, and in the most honorable manner. Their bones were carefully gathered up from the funeral pyre, where their bodies were consumed, and brought home to the city. There, for three days before the interment, they lay in state, beneath tents of honor, to receive the votive offerings of friends and relatives—flowers, weapons, precious ornaments, painted vases, (wonders of art, which after two thousand years adorn the museums of modern Europe,)—the last tributes of surviving affection. Ten coffins of funeral cypress received the honorable deposit, one for each of the tribes of the city, and an eleventh in memory of the unrecognized, but not therefore unhonored, dead, and of those whose remains could not be recovered.' On the fourth day the mournful procession was formed; mothers, wives, sisters, daughters led the way, and to them it was permitted by the simplicity of ancient manners to utter aloud their lamentations for the beloved and the lost; the male relatives and friends of the deceased

followed; citizens and strangers closed the train. Thus marshalled, they moved to the place of interment in that famous Ceramicus, the most beautiful suburb of Athens, which had been adorned by Cimon, the son of Miltiades, with walks and fountains and columns—whose groves were filled with altars, shrines, and temples—whose gardens were kept forever green by the streams from the neighboring hills, and shaded with the trees sacred to Minerva and coeval with the foundation of the city,—whose circuit enclosed

“the olive Grove of Academe,
Plato's retirement, where the Attic bird
Trilled his thick-warbled note the
summer long;”

whose pathways gleamed with the monuments of the illustrious dead, the work of the most consummate masters that ever gave life to marble. There, beneath the over-arching plane-trees, upon a lofty stage erected for the purpose, it was ordained that a funeral oration should be pronounced by some citizen of Athens, in the presence of the assembled multitude.

2. Misdirection was a favorite device of Gullah communications and strategy, well documented in the humor of its stories. Distracted by a bold claim, the main point is overlooked as attention is directed elsewhere.

The key process in the essay is identified in the second paragraph, the “rejection of the rejection.” It is a dialectical act that is subtle and lies beyond the reasoning previously documented in Gullah thought, but absolutely true. The enslaved would first reject Christianity, the immediate, visceral default position would be to say “no.”

Obviously, the default “no” was to be revisited. But only on new terms could their first rejection be rejected. Acceptance was not an either/or, but a reconsideration; a dialectical revision that set new rules for belief. One key seems to be the omniscient power of mercy.

3. The Gullah aesthetic is rooted in an oral voice. The phrases in the dashes in paragraph three are easily understood if read orally, slowly with full

phrasing. African communication is rooted in the tradition of language as sound rather than sight reading. Tone and ear are devices of meaning. The folktale also relies on sound. Its central form is a dialectic interplay; it reaffirms the independence of African thought and tells of another “no.”

4. Howard Thurman's concept, “the waiting moment,” is extremely important to understanding the presence of spiritual balance the enslaved sought daily; the “meanings” from chaos and “methods” from confusion paraphrase Dr. Thurman's description of what occurs in that moment.

5. Africans viewed life as a process, not as a series of discrete events. The transcendence of the spiritual path had appeal over daily tribulations.

6. The brief description of the personal epiphany is real. It is in keeping with the oral tradition of witnessing, sharing personal events that are the results of a larger process. Witnessing is a form of logical induction. It works from the simple event to the larger presence, a process different in nature and character than the experience it creates. Witnessing connects the specific case to a larger whole by pointing out the transforming quality.

7. The Allstons proffer an excellent example of the wealth and power of the enslaved system and its broad acceptance in American life. Their letters and records are an important part of the “voice” of slavery.

8. A brief look at the religious life of the enslaved provides a surprise: urban worship services in Charleston were integrated and well attended by the enslaved, who played a variety of roles in the community's religious life.

9. The absurdity of slavery is seldom displayed. Yet irrationality was a big part of the institutional practices and daily life. Absurdities were leveraged for advantages by the enslaved. What the absurd rests on is the idiocy of the whole system, and how it points to but falls short of freedom.

11. Slavery was an economic enterprise, deeply tied to race. Human beings were legally defined as property. The “Weeping Time” is missing in most history accounts.

12. Portuguese authorities required new captives be baptised before transport. Chapels with open doors at both ends were built on Angolan beaches. As priests slung water on their skins, reciting the baptism creed, human cargo marched through the chapels, across the sands into the waves, to the waiting ships.

13. The new transcript of Ann Scott's prayer from Dr. Lorenzo Dow Turner's field recording is an important work of long, neglected scholarship. While the opening section has many words missing, the discussion appears to involve the dangers and presence of snakes in the watery bogs of the rice fields.

14. The section following the transcript looks outside of theology to establish the points of view the enslaved as a group expressed in song, stories, and prayer.

15. Spirituals, like faith, were tied to daily life. Several of the song references, "Draw Lebel," "Lay Down, Body," "Sinner, Please," are specific to rice field tasks and Gullah customs.

16. The "eighth day" is a reference to the day in Genesis that God sets the world in motion and brings it to life. Southerners will know it as the day God created "Sweet Tea."

17. "Merci'trust!" is a traditional Gullah greeting. The answer is "Merci'forgib!"

Hail: Trust in the mercies of God!

Reply: Trust in the mercy of his forgiveness!

18. The essay is weighed toward first person voices; especially accounts of faith practices in the words of the enslaved; this adds insight and a direct window into their inner vision.

19. The final folktale is by turns funny and defiant, edged with danger and triumphant, sophisticated and understated. Its main character knows woe and mercy, and offers examples of how the falling down keep getting up—how the temptation of our desires alters our path and how we must fight these temptations whatever the external conditions. Set in slavery—every act and

idea is played out and unfolds within its context—it is evidence of a genuine affection seldom spoken of by its lead players, an example of the battle for humanity as well as faith that was threaded through every action. Yet there is humor and contradiction.

The community plays the role of saints—but they are lying; they are all sinners—devils! Massa is the devil, too—but he has a heart touched by grace.

Old John is every man, his powers prodigious. He corrupts the preacher and makes him dance. When it comes to his own weaknesses, he is undisciplined but firmly faithful to his gifts; he uses them well and wisely for others.

His flaw is his "lateness" (why is he delayed?). He is a mortal and moral man. His shame is tied to his "lateness" (Remember Gullah indirectness!) and to his duty, but he repents. With a mighty, mighty push against his inner vexation, he meets his outward trial and wins. Total victory.

From the miasma of temptation and fear, John's actions direct the narrative: John has beaten the strength of his own weakness. By the gifts of an unseen power he is redeemed. In a tale saturated with slavery, the main issue slyly becomes Old John's "lateness," its moral and physical danger, and how this danger goes away. The narrator's accolade has nothing to do with victory by the usual trickery or deceit. Old John', confronted with every challenge, shed his limitations: "In dem days," he was a man.

20. The quote of God speaking to Job is the final of the seven voices that are the dialogue of the work. Nineteenth century orators, African griots; a ubiquitous, anonymous oral tradition that includes the highest order of preaching, prayer, singing, and storytelling; a unique African language created in the crucible of slavery with elaborate grammar, rhetorical devices, and syntax; the history teller's voice; the first person voices of the enslaved; the voice of Ann Scott in prayer from the Library of Congress archives; and finally the voice of God, who appears and reminds Job, John Gill explains: "The earth has foundations, firm ones that it cannot be moved; but hung in the air on nothing! The power and will of God laid these foundations, and the Son of God upholds all things by the word." God goes on to describe the folly of using reason to seek his secret counsel, chiding Job to know his limits.



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